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## **Mixed feelings, curiosity or indifference: Searching and birth family contact for care-leavers and adopted young people**

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# Mixed feelings, curiosity or indifference:



Searching and birth family contact for  
care-leavers and young adults adopted from care



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**Care Pathways and Outcomes**  
The teens & early adulthood



**Montserrat Fargas Malet**  
*Research Fellow*  
*School of Social Sciences,  
Education and Social Work*





# The Care Pathways and Outcomes Study

- Longitudinal study following 374 children who were in care on 31/3/00 in NI and under 5 yrs.
- Aim: To find out what placements the children end up in; and whether placement type matter.
- 3 phases completed. On the fourth phase.





## IV: The Teens and Early Adulthood



### ISSUES

Handwritten words related to issues in teens and early adulthood:

- Identity
- Service-provision
- Coping
- Health
- Attachment
- Education
- Stress
- Self-concept
- Social-support
- Lifestyle
- Life-satisfaction
- Belonging
- Contact

### METHODS

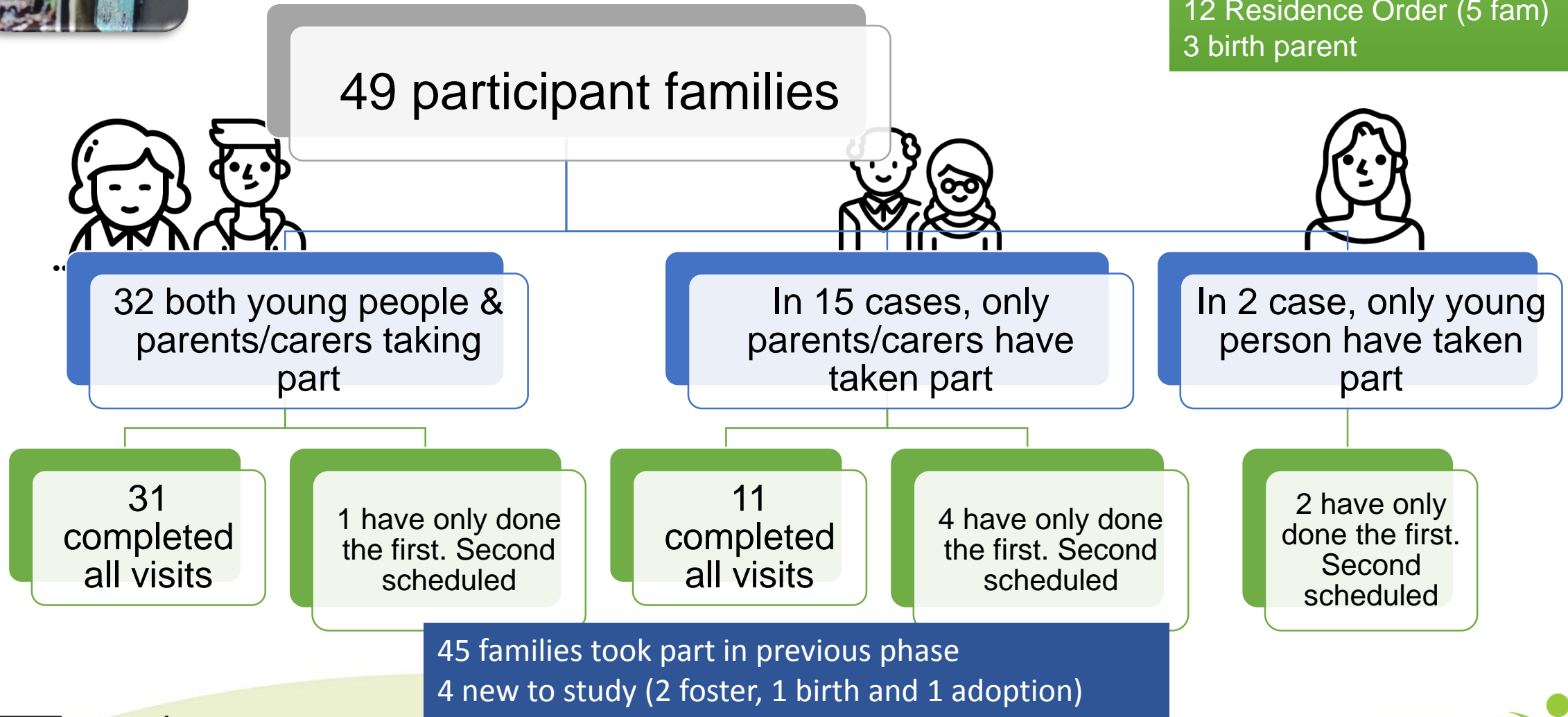
- 1<sup>st</sup> visit to families:
  - Online survey on iPad: 1 for young people & 1 for carers/parents;
  - Two tests on iPad for young people: spatial working memory and decision-making
- 2<sup>nd</sup> visit to families:
  - Semi-structured interviews.





# Data collection so far

13 foster care  
7 kinship care  
14 adoption (1 fam)  
12 Residence Order (5 fam)  
3 birth parent







# Contact and searching experiences

- Variety of attitudes and feelings towards the birth family
  - Contentment
  - Curiosity
  - No interest
  - Mixed or troubled feelings
- The role of social media
- Going to live with birth family in the late teens





# The 'CONTENT' group



4 in KINSHIP CARE

3 in FOSTER CARE

4 ADOPTED

N=15

1 with BIRTH  
PARENTS

3 RO



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# Contentment



- Most were still visiting/seeing birth family members or/and contacted them (by text or social media) regularly. They were important to them
- Used to have regular contact in the past.
- Some have no contact with certain family members, but content with that. Had it in the past, and stopped.
- Sometimes tensions between birth family members and caregivers (often kinship care).





I just text him (my dad) whenever I want, and go and see him whenever I want but I didn't really see him as much when I didn't drive but now that I do, I would see him a wee bit more because I go up and see him...



Was living with  
granny, 21 yrs old

Well, my birth family would be **important to me**, my granny and my granda, they are down in [town D] but I wouldn't really see them as often and my granda has dementia at the minute so he is not very well, ...



Adopted 22  
year old

... we sometimes meet his mummy when we're shopping in [town B], and you know he knows who she is, and he would come up and give each other a hug, and say hello. But there is no other contact apart from that now ... And his grandmother still comes up and gives him a birthday card. ... He **knows** they are his grandparents, but he wouldn't ask anything about it. Because to Steve, we are his family. But he is aware of who they are.



STEVE'S  
older adoptive sister



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# The 'CURIOUS' group

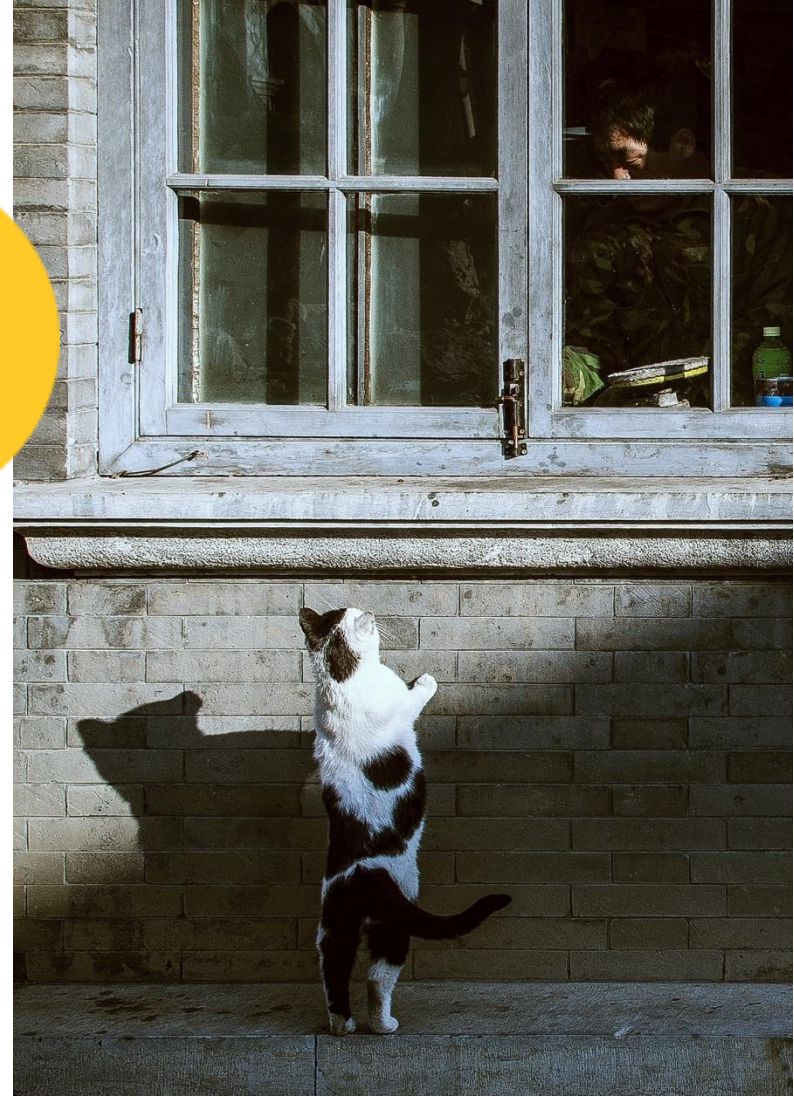


N=9

4 adopted

2 in foster care

1 in kinship care & 2 RO





# Curiosity



- Some young people had searched for certain family members just to see what they looked like, or how they were keeping.
- Half got in touch and half didn't.
- One had even gone to live with birth parent/s to satisfy their curiosity.
- Curiosity was often driven by a perceived lack of information.







Foster care  
19 years old

my younger brother. He is adopted so he is. So like he has accepted a friend request on Facebook and stuff but I haven't done anything else, do you know that way. Because I wouldn't want to put him in a situation if he doesn't know yet. [...] I haven't texted him or anything. Because I would rather wait until he would text me [...] [I searched] **just to see what he looked like, and what he was like**. Like obviously I could see from Facebook that he had the best of clothes and he has a good life you know that way and he is doing well and he has grown up in a loving home as well.



Adopted  
20 years old

I think more whenever it comes to my looks, I think I wanted more to see her because I wanted to see [...] I looked at him [my birth dad] and I was 'I don't look like him', so I was like 'I want to find her because I want to see do I look like her then, and I think it was more the curiosity of like looking like your family that's where it came from. Because I like the way [Sister K] and [Sister L] can go 'oh you've got mummy's' and 'You've got daddy's', but it's like a small thing. But then I was like 'I wonder where I get mine from'. I don't think it was about them but I think it was more a selfish thing, where **I wanted to know what I look like, why I look like that**. And then I got nothing from it because I still don't think I look like them.



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# The 'NO INTEREST' group



3 in FOSTER CARE

3 RO

3 ADOPTED

N=10

1 in KINSHIP  
CARE



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# Not interested



- Some young people clearly stated a lack of interest regarding the birth family, even in cases where they did not know much about them.
- In some cases, the young people used to have an interest, but due to negative experiences, they lost it.
- These young people did not consider their birth parents as part of their family, and expressed a lack of emotion towards them.



Adopted  
20 years old



Subject to a RO  
21 years old

I know about her [my birth mum] and that and I would know her to see her and that there, and I'm not **even interested**, she's not interested like. I was in [town] H&M last Saturday and she was there with her boyfriend [... ] No, probably not like [she doesn't know who I am] I've changed a while lot, but I'm not interested

He [birth dad] died from a heart attack but he'd been drinking the night before so... what do you expect, you know. [... ] [Didn't affect me] Probably because he was never there, you know. ... I didn't know him enough. ... They phoned [foster mum] to ask to see if I wanted to go [to the funeral] but... I said 'No' because there is **no point** in going.

Adopted  
18 years old



I know about them, I know they are from [town] but that is about it. I have never seen them. [... ] I don't know what they are doing, I don't know... It seems like they did what they had to do so I don't know, I have never really thought about it. [... ] knowing about your past and birth parents **isn't important** to everyone [... ] I am not sure, for me it may not be important but for someone else, I don't know.



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# The 'MIXED OR TROUBLED FEELINGS' group

N=9

4 adopted  
4 in foster care  
1 RO







# Mixed or troubled feelings



- Some young people expressed anger towards their birth family, as they experienced multiple rejection and abandonment.
- Often young people felt a mixture of feelings towards the birth family.
- A few appeared to feel the birth family were pulling them towards them, particularly when the young person was 'doing well'.
- Added complexity of bereavement. Young people dealt with it in different ways.





CARL

Was in  
foster care  
22 years  
old

Every time I see them they are offering me tablets.  
It would be [my brother], it would be my mum. [...] Because they are on this buzz they think that it's fabulous and I want to be with them doing this, that and the other. And I don't. [...] But I feel like... because I work and none of them can't work, and I drive and none of them drive, you know, they've always have something to say about every wee thing you do [...] It's not nice, it's really not nice like. Every time I'm with them, I leave upset or feeling low, every time I see my mum, I have instant **anxiety**, instant anxiety, even talking about it.



ERIC

Adopted  
19 years old

This year like I found out that I had two big sisters, that I had two big sisters. [...] It was shocking like. And then it was sort of like, I got really **depressed** this year because of it. [...] But one of my sisters put a load of crap on me because of, about the real family, which I didn't really want to know. It was affecting me, and I had it in my head.

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It is really hard to explain, mixed feelings, you don't know how you feel, and then you think about it and then that's when you start to get **angry** when you think about it.



NICHOLE

Subject to RO  
21 years old



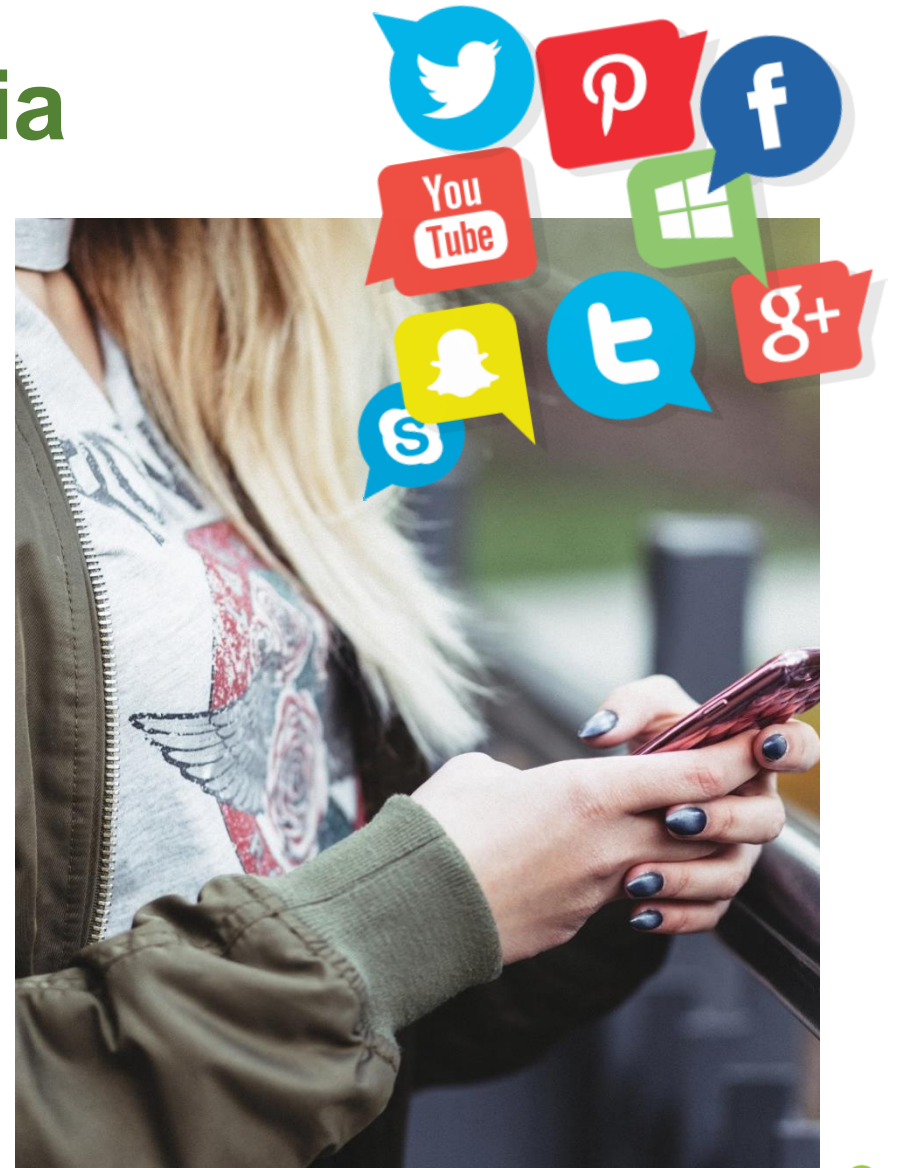
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# The role of social media

- Social media makes it easier for both birth families and young people to search or be in touch, and it's commonly used.
- Young people regarded it as both a positive but also potentially negative tool.
- Often it was used behind caregivers' back.





In foster care  
23 years old

Well of course you search for them.  
Like I'm sure everybody does it. Yes, I've done it. I have searched for my mum and my dad. I actually **found my mum in Facebook** and it was the worst **mistake** I've done in my life. Because I did speak to her and of course I had to ask her what I needed to know. And it just turned out to be... Like she was really rude [...] So I blocked her and... I haven't went looking for her anymore [...] **I needed to ask her** 'does she ever think of any of us?' like 'does she ever regret what she'd done', well, it wasn't really her choice anyway so... I just needed to know.



Adopted  
20 years old

I don't know that social media is a good thing.... It's kind of **scary** because I'm like I can look it and see she lives in x and that's a wee bit of information.



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# Going to live with birth family



- 7 young people went to live with birth parent when turning 16, 17 or 18. Two had been adopted.
- The move was driven by curiosity, and/or hope/wish to make it work. They found it hard to explain.
- It was often a harsh / negative experience. 4 returned to their previous carers shortly after and 2 moved to other placements or arrangements.





When he was between 16 and 18, dad started to be in touch all the time, wanting him to come and live there. ... He lived in [town] with his new wife.

Although we have always had contact, and it has always been fine. Suddenly, when Aaron turned 16, Aaron started getting Facebook messages 'Come and live with me'. At that time, Adam was taking legal high drugs. And whenever we were trying to put consequences, Aaron would come in and say 'My daddy said everybody does it, I can come down and live with him'. So we contacted Social Services, and a girl came down and spoke to Aaron, and Aaron said 'I don't want to go and live with him. He's putting a lot of pressure on me'. So they went down and spoke to dad. [...] they said 'Oh dad said that's fine, he'll leave it', but he didn't. He did it sneakily, he was contacting him at night time through Facebook, through Messenger, he was phoning him [...]  
So that went on for two years.



AARON'S  
Adoptive mum

Curiosity mainly drove it. Just to see what it was like. [...] It just happened. I can't even describe how it happened because it happened so quickly. And I've put it ... to the back of my head really. [...] [My return] happened quite abruptly. I was always told the door was open when I want. It kind of happened like that really, like a click of a finger. I had to call the police to get myself removed. It was that bad. One day, I was like physically being kicked out of the house for turning around and saying 'there's a social worker here, can you come back to the house?'

Adopted  
22 years old

WILLIAM



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# SUMMARY



- Young people had a wide range of reactions towards speaking/seeing members of their birth family, which didn't necessarily depend on placement type.
- It is easier now to search and get in touch with birth family members because of social media use, which was taken on by many. For some, it can turn up to be a rather difficult experience.
- In some cases, birth families contacted young people in their late teens, who in a few occasions, went to live with them for a short time. It rarely appeared to be a positive experience.





# Implications for policy & practice

- Young people should be given as much information as possible, so they can make their own informed decisions.
- Social workers should be aware and prepare for young people searching/contacting birth family through social media, and its implications for young people's mental health/wellbeing.
- Parents/carers might benefit from some guidance on how to deal with the diversity of feelings young people might experience regarding their birth families.





# Questions



Research team:  
Dominic McSherry (PI)  
Montserrat Fargas (CI)

<http://blogs.qub.ac.uk/pathways>  
[www.qub.ac.uk/cpo](http://www.qub.ac.uk/cpo)  
[m.fargas@qub.ac.uk](mailto:m.fargas@qub.ac.uk)



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